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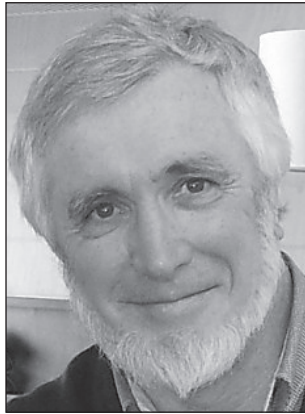
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Digging Deep: Christian Journalism's Contribution to *Public Justice*



by Bruce Wearne

Part One: Introduction

The Bible is provocative. From Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:20-21, we are provoked by its telling us that we are responsible, that we are accountable for what we do. It provokes us further by a message, repeatedly reiterated, that the Creator-

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Redeemer is intensely interested in all that we are and do, day in and day out. Now to say that is to reckon with something so profound, so extensive, that we might well shrink back from thinking further about what it means. Of course, the Bible doesn't just leave it there with a few propositions that remind us to be responsible, but neither is the biblical story presented in the form of a handbook by which we can go to an index to find the right instructions for whatever we have to do.

From beginning to end, the biblical story is given in order that we can face up to the unavoidable reality of our responsibilities and can, by faith, from heeding its message, locate ourselves within the story. What we do in life is indeed part of the overall story. As those who carry the Image of God, we are accountable for what we do and how we do it. Nothing that we can lay our hands upon comes outside this all-compassing fact, or directive.

One of those responsibilities is journalism and, in particular, political journalism, which should be viewed as a vocation. This essay will, at different points, make an appeal to principles that should guide Christian political journalism. Using the word "Christian" does not imply that this essay is written exclusively for "Christians" or even for those employed in "Christian" media. Here my concern is not only with the craft of political journalism as a way to promote public justice but also with Christian political journalism as part

of a wider and global Christian democratic political movement. As the essay proceeds, it will imply that political journalism requires journalistic skills, and Christian political journalism means developing those skills while also deepening an understanding of political life. Suffice it to say, Christian political journalism is not simply about employing Christians as political journalists. The person who, with a Christian profession, seeks a career in political journalism will need to learn the craft, to master the literary, analytical, and other required skills.

A first thing to notice is that I am already doing what I propose to write about: committing my thoughts to writing, editing my piece, and then seeking publication as a *public* contribution. So, as a piece of writing, this essay is a discussion about working as a political journalist in making a contribution to public debate. This piece of “journalism” is about the contribution journalism can make to political life. We already know that political journalism is an important part of political life; in fact, we can hardly think about politics without also thinking about the journalism that reports on how we are being governed.

If we are focused upon *Christian political journalism*, we could say that this essay is a response to the Biblical provocation noted above, which includes responsibilities of writing, scholarship, and membership in the political community. We will begin by examining the *political journalistic craft* as it functions in political life itself, in its reporting how we are being governed in public-legal terms. To do so means understanding the complex and diverse reality of our political life. Politics is another unavoidable dimension of our responsibility.

These two terms—“political journalism”—indicate distinguishable yet connected complex human responsibilities. As already suggested, that endeavour, as enacted human responsibility, is not a self-defining, self-enclosed reality but instead a way of engaging in stewardship, cultivating understanding among prospective readers.

Adding to the complexity of “political journalism” is the way electronic communication is transforming our lives, locally, regionally, globally. Major newspapers that have emerged from within national polities are now accessible to readers around the world. Television and radio

are well and truly internetted. Conventional media—newspapers, radio and television—are not only competing with a much wider dissemination of political information and analysis but are also extending their contributions so that their articles and programs are accessible long after they are initially published. These tools enable us to keep track of political developments. But even that is only part of the emerging complexity. The major commercial media outlets now find themselves in symbiotic competition with innumerable blog sites that comment upon and are able to link readers to their articles and opinions. Now that anyone can own and develop “My blog site,” journalistic possibilities have been opened up to allcomers.

These developments have increased not only the complexity of journalism but also the demands on the already complex task of public governance, including elected representatives to parliament, public servants, police, judiciary, and lawyers, all contributing in their diverse ways to resolve public-legal problems. Their work may not require them to set forth an explicit public philosophy to justify their policies and decisions. Work-place contracts may even seek to prevent such employees from breaching work-place confidentiality, but we are now witnessing the emergence of instant communication systems in which a politician’s communication on a Twitter account can become part of a media frenzy, part of a You-Tube disclosure that goes “viral.” So we should expect journalistic developments from elected public officials’ reports on their decision-making, on their policies as they are unfurled. One simply has to subscribe to the various accounts to “follow” the latest updates.

With the prospect of greater complexity and exposure in investigative journalism comes the possibility of a more comprehensive and ubiquitous superficiality and, as an added consequence, even greater complexity. Well-known public figures and controversialists thrive, it seems, by comments that anticipate responses to their “over the top” statements, even before readers and listeners have considered these views. Such technological devices, while holding out the possibility of enhancing public discourse, can also be used to close down debate by subtly dismissing all opposing responses even before they are registered. This is

actually the rhetorical device of reactionary politicians and “shock jock” journalists, who gain significant traction for their views. Their approach insists that there are but two views, right and wrong. The wrong view is then “blown out of the water,” leaving their own unscathed.

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As the work and comments of public officials are now subject to public scrutiny in these new ways, one wonders how a busy politician has time to send ongoing updates to mechanisms such as Twitter, to provide an instant update, an “emoticon,” and an opportunity to give a thumbs up. Thus are some of the new ways in which public opinion is measured.

Nevertheless, if we are to gain clarity about political journalism as a vocation, we must accept the fact that these newly emerging complexities are part of the context in which any God-given journalistic responsibility must come to expression. The complexities of public and political life, whether genuine news analysis or orchestrated “moral panics,” must impact those engaged in journalism. So, when we approach journalism as a genuine *political* service, the resulting articles and analyses may significantly support, challenge, and improve the contributions of public servants. But those articles may also distract those very people from doing what needs to be done by misdirecting public debate away from what needs to be discussed.

We therefore note a laudable aim for well-crafted journalism *in this context*. Perhaps more than ever before, political journalism must present an incisive, respectful, coherent understanding of political responsibility. This is no easy task. For

starters, articles that provide the results of a journalist’s investigations can either lead to a better understanding of policies and decisions or contribute to ongoing misunderstanding. They can clear the ground for vital questions that clarify and correct, or they can offer unhelpful ideologically motivated red herrings. Well-crafted journalism, then, can become a vital part of our political life, either promoting justice or allowing smug self-satisfaction to prevail when justice is needed.

As is obvious, even in trying to introduce our topic we have entered an ongoing debate about journalism, noting that political journalism cannot be neutral with respect to public justice. But how can journalism promote justice *without* taking sides, without violating its supposed responsibility to give objective reports?

As our social life takes on new local, regional, national, and international responsibilities, our decisions and the reasons for them must be chronicled and archived. At the same time, if journalism is to offer insight into public policy, it must draw upon its (philosophical) understanding of how political decisions and actions contribute to public justice. In other words, responsible political journalism depends on political scholarship and well-crafted political science, with a theory of political life that frames any examination of public governance.

That underpinning of political scholarship is necessary for the promotion and maintenance of public justice. When injustice prevails, political journalism must draw attention not only to the policies and situations that require redress after the fact but also to the policies, legislation and decisions that generated the injustice. For example, a journalist who, living under a military regime which has, at the point of a gun, illegally taken power, dissolved parliament, and reconstituted a democratic state according to the demands of senior military officers, must decide how her writing is to maintain integrity. She proceeds to criticise the *militarism* that now dominates public life in the country; in doing so, she must decide how to point out to the usurping military that they have broken trust with the people they are called to serve. She need not write disrespectfully about the military, even though she knows her dissent

will be thus portrayed. But she can use her article to explain to the Senior Officers who have engineered the coup the consequences of their action: they have undermined public trust in the military and its governing of the country. They have done a disservice not just to themselves, and not just to the non-military “part” of the political community, but also to the inner workings of the military institution itself. Criticism as scholarly, normative analysis seeks to rightly identify the structure of human responsibility under such circumstances.

But making that argument or even having it pass the military censor to be published does not mean that the militarist ideology is open for public debate. Military governments must regularly deal with officers principally committed to the military’s being subject to civilian oversight. Likewise, the critique of militarism itself may be allowed as long as it is marginalised, as long as those in charge resort to a demonstration of their benign tolerance of dissent. This example confirms the fact that ideology, when given legal and political legitimization, can constrain public debate about public justice even while it allows some degree of criticism—something the political journalist attuned to political science should appreciate, even as she types out her article.

We should not under-estimate the impact of widely disseminated, published analyses from journalists committed to bringing important *political* questions to light. Without journalists, many vital issues will remain beyond the critical gaze of politicians, public servants, general public, military, and police. And in a polity constitutionally committed to parliamentary democracy, not only the holders of public office, or political power, but also the citizenry needs to be kept informed. Citizens should not be passive recipients of political developments but should be within the political community.

Of course, journalists, politicians, and public servants are not the only ones who must analyse and make judgments about political life. In a parliamentary democracy all adult citizens bear some responsibility for how our social life is governed and for how government and citizenship should be *understood*. Parents and teachers can help deepen the political understanding of a younger generation, who will soon take responsibility and vote

as citizens. Their work in educating children can also be significantly supported by wise, well-crafted journalism.

Journalists, then, occupy an important place in confronting, analyzing, and suggesting remedies for political problems. But what of the political journalist who wants to approach her work as a Christian, as a journalist who publishes *political analyses and opinions* from a biblical standpoint, including those about governance, which God has built into our creatureliness? A biblical stance assumes that political journalism’s task includes contributing to *just* public governance.

Part Two:

At the outset, it is good to recognise that a Christian political journalist will confront a nest of peculiar problems. These may not be seen as relevant by the non-Christian journalist or recognized by the Christian journalist. Still, Christian political journalism can render an important service by uncovering and addressing these problems, problems at the core of the journalistic craft.

Presumed Religious Neutrality

The first is the belief that political journalism requires an ability to stand “above” politics, to assume a religiously neutral or “secular” stance, unhinged from a journalist’s deepest beliefs. Journalism, it is believed, makes its contribution by its fearless “objectivity,” its even-handed impartiality, its non-judgmental approach to all sides. Those who talk about a *Christian* (or other religious) approach are judged as living a secular life in terms of “non-secular” ideas and are admonished to keep such ideas and theories at bay to enable the free development of secular life as we know it. A *Christian* vocation in any secular realm is viewed as noble, even worthy, but is really only respected as the Christian’s *private* reflection about what she is doing. Such a designation as “*Christian* journalism” can only be viewed as a person’s private construction of reality. Whatever she is doing as part of this world is “secular” and therefore can only become religious if religious matters are brought in from the outside to what is essentially non-religious “stuff.” While this view of “secular” life is widespread, it is also under a great strain, since even those who want to keep

religion out cannot deny their *belief* that “religion” *should* be kept out. Generations have been educated in some version of this “secular” view, and even generations of Christian citizens, those who have been university and professionally trained, whatever their denomination or confession, have been encouraged to view their faith in such “view from the outside” terms. In fact, it is likely that their churches have insisted that they do so!

How, then, does a *Christian* political journalist work, study, and write in a field that assumes she, as *Christian* journalist, keeps her position only if her faith is kept private. Yes, she will be warmly welcomed into the fellowship of “secular” journalists, and it will be anticipated that she might on occasion bring her (private) religious views to bear upon the pieces that she submits for publication. But the suggestion that she is actually following a journalistic path called *Christian* implies an idea believed to be unsustainable. If her journalism were to be accepted on her terms, would it not imply that *all* political journalism should be understood as equally religious, even if not specifically *Christian*? Is that not to assert a private view as norm for public journalistic activity? And in our tolerant society, can such a view be accepted as anything more than marginal deviance? To believe otherwise would be to allow the “deviant” to suggest a normative path for *all* journalism. This is a primordial problem that any aspiring *Christian* political journalist must address.

So here is the question: Is there an *intrinsic* connection between journalism and God-given human responsibility? Is journalism part of what God has called into existence by his creation, by his endowing his image-bearers with power to steward the earth? Is journalism to be received thankfully as a genuine task based in creation to assist God’s image-bearers in their many human tasks? Does journalism find its true status in the two great commandments identified by Jesus Himself: to love God above all and love our neighbor with the same attentive care that we give to ourselves? Or is journalism simply a technique that humans have devised from out of their own genius, a development from our tendency to tell stories and talk about our experiences in order to gain control over what comes along?

Historical Ambiguities and Contradictions

This question leads us to further unavoidable issues for the aspiring journalist. She may not be aiming at a specifically Christian readership, and her articles may find their way into any number of secular and Christian magazines, newspapers, and journals. But wherever her work is published, she must keep in mind that her readers will interpret her writings in any number of ways, particularly when she broaches “religious” considerations.

The misunderstandings and disagreements about *political life*, even among Christians, are already evident to anyone investigating political science. If the Christian journalist ignores such disagreements, she will perpetuate the situation and easily be labelled “liberal” or “fundamentalist,” or some other term, by those quick to suggest that fellow Christians are on the slippery slope and no longer on-side with the “good guys,” who support correct political views, views which, by dint of a presumed majority approval, are deemed sufficiently “objective,” even when they lack attention to historical matters.

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This second problem is no less challenging than the first. Any citizen approaching political life from a Christian political perspective must develop historical sensitivity to the task of government and explain why Christians have failed to come to a shared understanding of their political responsibilities. We may all profess faith in the One God, the Creator and Redeemer Jesus Christ, but just as “secular” political debate seems to be constantly divided between “left” and “right” options, so also many Christian citizens—liberal, libertarian, conservative, orthodox, fundamentalist, “bible-believing”—assume that politics is simply a matter of being aligned somewhere on the latest left-versus-right spectrum. How is a political journalist to challenge that prejudice? To do so is

to court opposition on all sides because it indicates that any ruling presumption about what constitutes religiously-neutral “impartiality” is by no means impartial.

In the West, these political differences among Christians are often attributable to entrenched perspectives, perspectives that need close examination. It may be that, in their different ways, these perspectives originate in the political writings of Augustine (354-430) and the Christian traditions that arose from his diverse work. To understand the conflicts and contradictions among Christians will involve historical scholarship, especially as debates among Christians continue to rage—about political responsibilities, membership in civil society, requirements of citizenship, the structure and role of government, and the way our government impacts international relations.. Such disagreements among Christians simply cannot be adequately charted in denominational terms.

Christian Departures from a Biblical View of Public Governance

In other words, the Christian political journalist must understand why those most strident in their adherence to Western Christianity or most passively acquiescent to civil-religious “moral majorities” often adhere to views of public governance that twist the biblical witness. In this sense, Christian political journalism should encourage readers to reconsider the biblical view of civil government. Moreover, it should work to alter a negative view of government, persistent in Western democratic societies. This negativity seems to have evolved historically from a Christian view that though civil government may not be a sinful institution in itself, it was nevertheless necessary for God to institute because of the fall. Some Christians continue to assume such a view of government (and political life) and then to read this view back into Holy Scripture. Ironically, it has sometimes been most forcibly expressed by those who deem that their own political service can be best maintained by a public declaration of loyalty to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Such a view should be explored by wisely crafted political journalism.

If Christian political journalism is to alert readers to the creationally positive and necessary role

of government in the political community, it must study the influence of such a negative view upon people’s attitudes toward political responsibility, legislation, and public policy. Is it not feasible that such a negative view has prevented governments from doing the good things they should have done? And if membership in the political community is a God-given part of our calling as God’s image-bearers, our task must include challenging a prevailing negative view of civil government’s role in Western societies.

Part Three:

Even decades before the emergence of what we experience today as modern liberal democracies (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Europe), the “liberal” philosophy of leading thinkers, most notably John Locke (1632-1704), influenced how the dispersed, migrating peoples of Europe viewed themselves as they shaped public life in their colonies. Government institutions, commercial and industrial enterprises, churches, civil-society associations, and families were all shaped by the prevailing “liberal” view that politics is a necessary evil, the adjudication of a necessary struggle between people with competing interests who all ascribe to the presumed right to maintain sovereignty over their own lives. This “individualism” remains to this day, and from this view the *raison d’être* of government follows as a matter of course. Politics is first and foremost about ensuring that the sovereign individual maintains sovereignty over all aspects of her private and public life. This “liberal” view of society has had to adjust itself to pragmatism, relativism, and a view of “modern” history that sees history, if not modernity, as the inevitable onward march of secularization. It is also deeply embedded in the postmodern scepticism about all authoritative views.

The mythology of human autonomy basic to this liberal humanistic outlook has been awaiting exposure by a deepened Christian point of view since the second half of the 19th century, a point of view that would gladly involve itself in public debate. But rather than being prompted by its horrendous civil war to face inner weaknesses of the “American experiment” as enshrined in its constitution, the US “bounced back,” suggesting that its

civil-religious sense, its “manifest destiny” and “exceptional status” had been rekindled.

Not surprisingly, Australia, New Zealand, and more latterly the U. K., have allowed themselves to be pulled along in the seeming irresistible post-World War II, Cold War, post-Cold War slipstream of this “American way of life,” with its world-wide sense of a civil-religious mission, its eyes shut tight to the fact that from a Christian standpoint such a view of politics is immersed in its own heretical character.

This mission became the prevailing religious vision of the West, the means by which the world would be kept safe for democracy—through democracy. The U. S. put itself forward as the “new lead society,” the bearer of political light that could show the way; and despite evidence that such a

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civil-religious commitment leads to disaster, the effort rolls on. From the cessation of hostilities at the end of the Second World War to the present day, successive U. S. Presidents have lived out their civil-religious piety, emphasizing to the world that their republic is a unique manifestation of God’s mercy and grace. America, God’s New Israel, having been blessed by God, is now called to serve the world and bring freedom to the entire globe.

Christian political journalism must find an alternative to this heresy. And in confronting the ongoing American attempt to immanentize the eschaton, the Christian political journalist will find herself tackling head-on the begrudging liberal view of civil government, with its pious adherence to the sovereignty of the individual.

If we look carefully at the array of Christian denominations and the world-wide enterprises that

they sponsor, we find that these missions and agencies are extremely busy on the international stage, engaged in aid and development programmes. Innumerable educational, environmental and public health-care projects are being sponsored in the developing world by Western churches and mission agencies that have arisen from societies dominated by a liberal humanistic vision of political life. Often they lend covert support to the *political* contribution of indigenous Christian communities, even if their access to these countries forbids their political involvement and evangelism. As a result, tensions, ambiguities and contradictions arise. Moreover, such “Christian aid” finds itself tightly regulated by government agreements between donor and recipient countries, preventing such “evangelism” or “public advocacy.” This is the dilemma faced by many “post-colonial” Christian agencies. For a government’s endorsed aid to end up in church community’s outreach in its local community is easily construed as a violation of the separation of church and state. But it is also, in an historical sense, a challenge to the liberal humanistic presumption that religion must be kept “private.” Christian churches and denominations that may avoid political life on the home front, having complacently inherited a negative view of government, often find themselves adopting a more positive view overseas. How are they to extricate themselves from indigenous Christian political movements that require a more positive and engaged view of *political* responsibilities by local citizens? This poses a major *political* challenge of *ecumenical* and *international* proportions. How are such Christian agencies to structure themselves and relate to one another at home and overseas in *political* terms when they hold an attenuated view of *Christian* political responsibility?

When we look carefully at denominational structures and the way responsibilities are distributed in church organisations, are we not reminded of diverse and distinctive ways in which civil government should be understood? Congregational churches, by their organisation and worship-service symbolism, may remind us of a town meeting. Episcopal churches, on the Anglican model, seem Monarchical in social structure and in the conduct of public worship. Reformed churches in their cor-

porate organisation and in the structuring of their worship services, take on symbolism reminiscent of a shareholders' meeting, with the public declaration of the state of the company.

Despite these evident differences in tradition and *modus operandi*, when we look at diverse denominations and their local manifestations in local communities, do we not encounter co-operative efforts to bring resources together to serve the hungry, poor, homeless, neglected and sick? Yes, much good is being done, yet denominational structures sometimes initiate a kind of welfare competition, some being more competitive in their operations than others. And some will justify such welfare work to their members as "outreach," when it may be designed to entice new members into the fold. These operations, for all the good they provide, remind us of the way businesses advertise their products to establish a niche among consumers. While Christian political journalism should not neglect Christian efforts in providing social welfare, it cannot ignore the fact that many church-based organizations around the liberal democratic West are reeling from public inquiries that have exposed systemic child neglect, sexual abuse, and moral corruption. Christian political journalism should not avoid such facts.

To consider the current disorganized, dispersed, and anarchic condition that prevails amongst many Christian churches is to ask how this state of affairs came about. Could it have something to do with an endorsement, since the 16th and 17th centuries, of a negative view of civil government as part of their respective confessional stances? By implicitly endorsing a negative view of civil government, have Christian denominations around the globe inadvertently imported a general negativity about governance into the internal life of churches and local congregations? Might also this view of both civil government and church government coincide with the secularised gospel many churches proclaim these days? Do Christians view ecclesial order with the same *political* negativity that characterizes modern liberalism? This may be one way *Christian* political journalism could provide deeper insight into taken-for-granted Christian attitudes.

From an international point of view, this nega-

tivity has led to seemingly irresolvable problems in former colonial territories where church denominations are powerless to prevent emerging political regimes from being dragged into the neo-liberal slip-stream. Let me give an example from my own contact with Fijian journalists and citizens.

The new constitution that has been imposed upon the Fijian people and under which a "democratic" election will be held in September 2014 is an attempt to synthesize Western liberal views of "freedom" with a parliamentary democracy that relies upon the "reserve power" of the Fiji military to hold the small island republic together. Previously, the Methodist Church of Fiji fell into the civil-religious trap of providing this glue and, as a consequence, found itself effectively endorsing the coups of 1987. But now, due to its previous endorsement of "coup culture," it has been edged out of that elite "behind-the-scenes" status to be replaced by Fiji's military. It is unclear whether the Pacific Council of Churches, let alone the churches of Australia and New Zealand, understand what has taken place, let alone how Fiji's Christian society is being radically secularised by a perverse militarism. Recent reports in which church officials discuss the upcoming elections and the easing of restrictions upon Methodist Church meetings indicate a blithe lack of attention to this restructuring of the way of life for all Fijians under the cover of pious optimism presenting itself as Christian hope.

Part Four:

When political journalism is doing its work as it should, it digs deep in its search for political understanding, even as it reminds readers that their citizenship requires them to "dig deep" in pursuit of justice and a true perspective of political life. Any citizen who would gain wisdom for promoting public justice will face formidable complexities in political life. To guide them, journalists who have immersed themselves in history and philosophy in pursuit of a normative understanding of life in God's world, and of God's creational and redemptive purposes, will clarify those norms of justice, encapsulated by the command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

To do this work, political journalism must keep itself fresh by applying biblical norms to all

decision-making. Disseminating the results of sustained political enquiry is not only the job of journalists. Public officials, voters, parents, teachers, students, consumers, and members of all professions bear responsibility for ensuring that government renders its own public-legal service to ensure justice for all involved.

Some journalism tries to fix the political “problems” by getting more “good guys” appointed to public office. But how will political life be enhanced by having more “good guys” (i.e. those who agree with the journalist) appointed? Even many professing Christians allow political life to be construed in a personalistic way. For example, it is sometimes assumed that a candidate who attends church regularly, makes a Christian profession in a press conference or when speaking in parliament, and admits to praying about decisions before making them will be a better candidate than one who doesn’t or who doesn’t make a show of these matters. In some cases, “good guy” politics can simply be a Christianized version of the same political assumption of human autonomy basic to the “liberal” view of human self-sufficiency.

In Western polities, the complexity of social responsibility makes many citizens apprehensive if not alarmed. In this context, it is vital that citizens of older generations look carefully and critically at the way they have been nurtured. Public education over the 20th century has been dominated by pragmatism, resulting in the dominant public philosophy that wisdom is whatever a “wise-guy” can conjure up to solve a problem quickly. Is this what lies behind the media’s seeming obsession with comments made “off the cuff,” designed to raise eyebrows or make us laugh? The emergence of the radio talk-back “shock jock” bears testimony to a deeply engrained pragmatism. Such columns and “real life” interviews confront us with an approach to political responsibility that endorses slick, well-chosen aphorisms and platitudes designed to gain attention and foment moral panics. How does one combat this kind of public discourse without engaging in it?

There is no easy way to do so because there is no short-cut to wisdom. Such circuitous short-cuts can only provide instant or short-term populist endorsement for *ad hoc* measures. Whether over

one month our own blog-site registers 200,000 or 25 hits, we still need to fulfil our other tasks, let alone meet the problems that arise because our citizenship has been malformed and our “discursive democracy” tragically under-developed.

In order to develop our discursive democracy, we must remember that our membership in the political community exists as a God-ordained part of human responsibility, unfolding since creation. And if citizenship is to be formed in positive ways, well-written op-ed pieces must alert citizens to what is being discussed in their political community, outlining positive suggestions to overcome problems. Journalism cannot avoid expressing what journalism *ought* to be. That means that when an op-ed piece directs comments at taken-for-granted thinking that overlooks vital matters, the journalist’s own research and reflection has forced her to re-consider her own misguided views.

Political journalism can also uncover issues that have slipped below our radar, helping readers reconsider and “dig deep” to the roots of current problems. Political journalism, as much as political action, should be about loving our neighbors politically. Our neighbors include students, who need guidance in how, as citizens, they can sidestep the moral panic generated in and exploited

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by commercialized media. And it may be that the biblically inspired hope that propels the Christian journalist may challenge a student about her political responsibility and even to consider political journalism as a career.

Part Five:

The aspiring political journalist should know that her craft requires a comprehensive perspective, one that includes a wide range of political issues and topics as well as historical and philosophical *depth*. The principle is clear: articles *about* justice must strive to *do* justice.

But here we come across a rather startling fact: as we noted at the outset, the possibilities for creative Christian political journalism have multiplied with the development of the internet. As much as the power of sharing superficial and personal views has expanded, so also must wisdom be deepened to promote positive interaction leading to positive political consequences.

Political Journalism as Critical Self-Examination

In accordance with biblical norms, a Christian political journalist should resist launching into hard-hitting criticism until she has harvested the inconsistency and hypocrisy in her own political viewpoint (Matthew 7:1-5). The initial leading characteristic is, then, not a “one-off” act but a continually developing disposition. In other words, politics is about *political* habits: an op-ed *Christian* reflection on political habits can prompt the exploration of assumptions held by citizens about political success, about themselves in public life, about the need for new Christian political organizations, about the place of the church in public life, and also about the inheritance of a persistent, pragmatic activism. As a precondition for standing for public office, candidates not only should be wise but should be prepared to grow wiser about the demands of public justice, whatever their persuasion or background. Likewise, one seeking a career in political journalism needs such deeper wisdom and, of course, will ask where to sharpen such an understanding and how to respect public office. She will also need to understand the biblical perspective of “administration” as a gift of God’s Spirit, in the face of negative features of our political community’s history, and of the habits of mind and heart that can counteract those destructive aspects. She must also improve her knowledge of current affairs: a nation’s role in the wider world and life of its citizens depends on self-criticism at a

grass-roots level, infusing the entire political life.

Political Journalism as Raising Awareness

If political responsibility is not primarily about what we say but about what we do to meet needs, rescue those in danger, and bring reconciliation to conflict, it means involving citizens in movements and initiating programs to alleviate such problems.

Consider the following questions, all of which require careful consideration: How are we to think of our political responsibilities in relation to these matters? Is it sufficient for the Christian community to concentrate solely on their own churches, schools, and welfare agencies? How is Christian political activity to be organized? And what can, here and now, be properly and efficiently organized on a para-church basis? Can a case be made for furthering the Christian way of life by promoting Christian *political* organizations? How could this be done? How are Christian people to be alerted to the weaknesses of their own political understanding? And in trying to face up to such weaknesses, how do we make sure that our exposé does not demoralize those whose spirits already need to be lifted from the guilt of acquiescence in manifest injustice? All of these questions should be addressed by journalism.

Political Journalism as Respect for the Every-Day Life

Aside from issues, political conversation can be mundane, for it can include what we have in common as members of the same suburb, the same political community (rubbish collection, public health, sewers, water, electricity, roads and road rules). We also share events, tragedies, and disasters, in recognition of which there are political celebrations and days set aside and monuments built and streets named and autobiographies written to encourage respectful political remembrance. Included is the calling to respect life, both pre-birth and post-birth. Art, architecture and literature are all valid topics, as are gardening and farming, food production and diet. All are part of “every-day life” in our polity.

Political Journalism as Informed Political Conversation

But returning to the major issues, the aspiring political journalist will find it necessary to promote frank political conversation. How is she to show her readers that she understands the deep differences that divide them? How is she to respect the histories that make resolution difficult? The journalist can consider the views put forward by prominent dissidents and public intellectuals as a way to instruct the public. Even basic definitions of concepts such as “justice” may affect the tenor of discussion.

The aspiring political journalist should know that her craft requires a comprehensive perspective, one that includes a wide range of political issues and topics as well as historical and philosophical depth. The principle is clear: articles about justice must strive to do justice.

Political Journalism Offering a Public Service in Solidarity With Our Public Servants

Whether investigating corruption or celebrating an event, political journalism should promote a public sense of solidarity, if not sympathy, for elected representatives, lawmakers, civil servants, the judiciary, attorneys, and those charged with law enforcement and the military (as well as other journalists and public intellectuals). This ascription of due respect does not ask for injustices to be glossed over. To the contrary: It is precisely because these offices are respected that political journalism must resist injustice, apathy, or ignorance, but it must do so in forthright and clear terms.

Political Journalism as Political Debate

That clarity includes political debate, though debate and discussion between electors and elected has become markedly attenuated in some politi-

cal communities. There are efforts to regulate the activities of “lobby groups,” and parliamentary committees are charged with the task of consulting regularly with “peak bodies,” which represent professional, commercial, or industrial interests. Political journalism will need resources in order to keep abreast of all “behind the scenes” developments. And while political journalism may not be able to solve the *structural* problems that have emerged within many polities where democratic forms of governance prevail, it must draw the attention of elected representatives and electors to any weakening of the system of representative democracy and offer ways to improve the system.

Moreover, decisions made by the courts can presuppose faulty assumptions in the judiciary about its own competence, say, in matters pertaining to how a school will teach some or other theory. Legislation and courts can be unfair in the way school communities and families are disadvantaged by government presumption that favors secularized public education. Laws and courts may also confirm a public lack of respect for life at all of its stages, so the challenge of *Christian* political debate is not simply about scoring a “point” in relation to this or that issue but about promoting a comprehensive, sustainable political perspective that keeps the conversation about contentious issues alive until justice is done.

Some injustices have generation-to-generation consequences. The need for redress in generational terms cannot be easily met, but it should be part of the national political agenda. Here, too, political journalism can meet its vocational obligations by keeping the issue alive. For example, the failure to recognise Australia’s indigenous peoples in the Federal Constitution of 1901 coincided with and effectively endorsed an ongoing *structural* injustice, confirming disadvantage to aboriginal people to this day. In this sense “reconciliation” is not just about making formal declarations, recognizing the traditional custodians of the land in public speeches, and piously affirming “equality” in the abstract, but is about forming a national outlook in which equity is accepted as a normative guideline to ensure access for all to the opportunities in our shared way of life.

Political Journalism as Part of a Witness to the World

As politics is *historical, regional* and *global*, how should Christian citizens of any one nation view efforts to establish reconciliation between former enemies? Christians, in whatever part of the earth they seek to pursue public justice, must resist the heresies and mythologies of their own significance. Jesus' advice to his disciples about making a great contribution is incisive and specific: We are to view ourselves as servants (Luke 22:24-27). Political journalism that is motivated and oriented in servant terms must involve critique, but that requires careful analysis of the competing ideologies in the political arena. The impact and outworking of these need to be known, whether liberalism, individualism, nationalism, socialism, Marxism, libertarianism, or any variety of materialism and consumerism.

Even the world-wide sentimentalist demand for "marriage equality" is the outworking of the neo-liberal view that all of life is a matter of individuals making contracts with each other. This demand wants a re-definition of marriage because on such neo-liberal grounds, the definition of lawful marriage as the pledged union for life of a male and female denies the neo-liberal ideology that social life in all its dimensions is simply a matter of people contracting together to safeguard their sovereign rights. In this way, the "marriage equality" movement, as an expression of neo-liberalism, is likely to change into something else when the mythology of sovereign individuals creating their own life chances by their "choices" is no longer tenable. Christian political journalism can uncover the liberation of a life freed from the idolatrous commercial massaging of sexual instincts and celebrity sentimentalism. As it identifies trends prominent in public debate, Christian journalism can chart a fresh course for renewed Christian reflection and confrontation in civil discourse.

Political Journalism as Yeast

As we see, an op-ed piece is not just an opportunity to express a personal political viewpoint. Instead, it can be framed as a contribution to ongoing public debate or as a consideration of the justice in a particular circumstance. An op-ed piece should not be a "hit 'n run" exercise but should invite discussion. As yeast, seeking to leaven the entire "lump" of political debate (see Galatians 5:9), political journalism should aim to encourage readers and lift the morale of citizens so that they value their own political voice, no matter how tentative their views may be. In this respect normative political journalism should be generous in sharing political insights. It may have to come to terms with a polity in which cynicism about politics is deeply engrained. It will need to resist the many temptations that face the erstwhile journalist, such as turning away from political journalism altogether. But one's task as a journalist is to challenge the decline of public debate and, where civility has been eroded, to disclose fresh, merciful communicative openness.

Christian political journalism should be no retreat but an engagement that confronts public cynicism with forthright discussion of its political consequences. The aim is not so much to trump cynicism but rather to suggest an alternative way of understanding and bearing political responsibility. We may indulge in satire, but we will also avoid sarcastic turns of phrase. Christian political journalism will also, on occasion, indulge in rich and enlivening political humor, an important means of enriching our everyday conversation.

May God bless all journalists who seek to promote public justice by encouraging renewed reflection about government and political responsibility. Theirs can be no "last word" on any topic, but with God's help we can look forward to the emergence of a tradition of Christian political journalism as a new generation gets to work acknowledging Jesus Christ, who is the First and Last Word, Alpha and Omega, for our life.